Santa Clara County Flora and Fauna

Game Animals of Santa Clara Valley

By Albert E. Johansson

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Notes:

- Original in possession of the Santa Clara County Archives, San Jose, California
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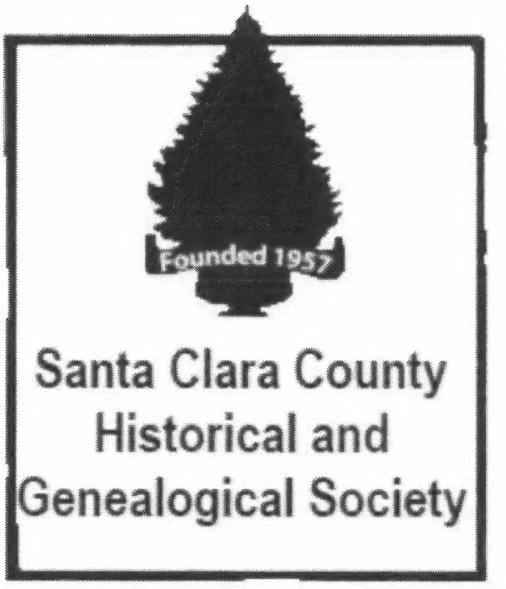

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Among the animals listed here, the Mule Deer, Jack Rabbit, and Cottontail may be considered genuine game animals. The Puma is usually hunted by professionals with the aid of dogs. Gray Squirrels are under the State's ban, and the Ground Squirrel is only sought by small boys with small guns, or an occasional needy rancher in search of illy flavored meat. Coyotes are too wary to offer a fair shot and, it has been said, too scarce to make hunting them worth while.

The Mule Deer is found in the Mt. Hamilton range. It is a large, stocky animal, reaching a maximum length of seven feet, a height of three feet and a half, and sometimes grows antlers which reach thirty inches from the deer's forehead. These antlers are of a size between that of the White-tail Deer and the Elk. The Mule Deer takes its name from its long, broad ears. Its summer coat is rusty red; the winter coat is grayish-brown. When in its home among the mountains its food preferences include the wild lilac, the willow, and the manzanita. It, however, migrates altitudinally with the seasons; therefore, its menu undergoes a certain amount of change.

Its mating habits are similar to those of other deer. The bucks keep to themselves in the summer in groups of about ten. The mating season comes on in the autumn. In the spring the does part company to have their young, after which they remain with their fauns for a period. Both bucks and does may be seen banded together during the winter. The number of young deliver - ed is usually two.

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These deer are not good runners in open country, but, once among the rocks or in broken land or on an incline, they can leave a horseman behind. They have a characteristic stiff-legged jump which was early remarked, - as early as when Audubon first saw them in 1843.

The Mule Deer has a variety of names. Among these are the Rocky Mountain Blacktail and the Mexican name - "venado burro".

Despite its name for fierceness and despite its character for blood-thirstiness, the Puma is really a timid beast. Although some accounts of assults upon human beings are true, almost all are gross exaggerations. Its loud weird cry, and its habit of following belated wayfarers at a safe distance out of pure curiosity, have given it the undeserved reputation it carries. Although it refrains from direct attacks upon human beings, it does them injury enough, for it has the habit of cattle killing. Its favorite food, in fact, is a young colt, and many a ranchman has awakened in the morning to find the offspring of his prize mare the prey of an enterprising Puma. Sheep men, too, have suffered much from the alimentary demands of this beast. In the national forests it is known by the same name as the rifle of the Leather Stocking Tales - "Deerslayer". A price has been set upon its head, and professional hunters track it for the sake of the bounty.

The Puma, also called Mountain Lion and Cougar, attains nine feet in length, which does not include three feet of

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tail. It can reach the weight of two hundred pounds. It is slab-sided and unusually long for its height. The Puma's ears are pointed and untufted. Its color varies from pale rufous to yellowish brown.

The animal is nocturnal in habit and prefers stalking to lying in wait when hunting.

In this county it is found in the Mt. Hamilton range.

The Cottontail rabbit ranges throughout Santa Clara Valley. It is a little beast, scaling about two and a half pounds; short ears, short feet, and a fluffy, white tail distinguish it. Its habitats are brush, dry creek beds, foothills, mountain sides, and the borders of cultivated land. It is a well-known vegetarian. While the Cottontail often lives and nests in the bushes, in open country it digs itself a burrow. The nests are built of grass and lined with fur torn by the mother from her dewlap. This tiny rabbit is very prolific, bringing forth several litters of young yearly. The young are born helpless and blind. The harm the Cottontail does is negligible, although it sometimes kills young trees by gnawing the bark off around them, or "girdling" them.

Along with others of the humble, the Cottontail can claim at least one distinguished ancestor, for was not B'rer Rabbit of "The Uncle Remus Tales" one of the Cottontail clan?

Jack Rabbits (more properly Hares) are familiar to all residents of the county. It is an animal with long legs, long ears, and a long, thin neck. It is no bird of resplendent

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plumage, but is satisfied with its gray sides, dark gray back, and the black tips on its ears. It may be seen both by day and night, for it lacks the Cottontail's preference for the dark hours. Also, unlike the Cottontail, it never burrows, but builds forms among dense bushes, where it brings forth one litter a season, containing from one to six young, who are born with open eyes and full fur. The Jack Rabbit, because so preyed upon by coyotes, hawks, and owls, is a very keen beast, as its well-known habit of periodically sitting upon its haunches to scan the landscape and scent the air will testify. It is said that it is so swift that only greyhounds can course and catch it.

The Gray Squirrel, whose home is in the mountains, is no longer a game animal, because its sparsity has given it the protection of the law. Epidemics among these animals in 1920 and 1921 greatly reduced their numbers.

Now for a real pest: the California Ground Squirrel. Throughout the valley it is quite properly cursed by the farmers. It toils not, neither does it spin, but it has not the least hesitation in reaping the profits of the labors of others. Alfalfa, grain, and fruit alike suffer from its rapaciousness. Against the amount of these things that it eats, its occasional meal of insects or dead flesh does not weigh at all.

In person it is a small animal with prominent ears and a bushy tail, a heavy body and a gray-brown coat.

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The California Ground Squirrel is a burrower. It loves to locate its nests where they cannot easily be gotten at or dug out, -- among slide rock, crevices of cliffs, under boulders, under roots of trees, fences, or buildings. Upon occasion it digs holes in open country. These last are surrounded by earthen mounds. This squirrel often lives in groups, and trails lead from burrow to burrow. In the burrows food is stored for bad times. When approached by an enemy, warning is given by one of the colony in a high, shrill note, whereupon all disappear into the ground.

Not only does the Ground Squirrel steal from the farmer, but can also carry to his victim the germs of the dread bubonic plague. Because it steals, and because it conducts germ warfare, the State maintains a campaign against this squirrel. This campaign's chief offensive weapon is poison grain, which has proven quite successful. One of the more curious weapons utilized is the Golden Eagle, which the law protects because of its predilection toward a diet of the State's enemies. This eagle has grown so bold it now nests in low oaks.

Hunters tell that the Coyote is still to be seen in this county. It has been called the Prairie Wolf, and is of a dust-brown color, and is very wary and cowardly.

The Coyote is man's good friend in one way: It eats Ground Squirrels; but, otherwise, it is a pest to the outlying rancher, who is bold enough to let his domestic fowl run loose.

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